



# Black women jab for heart health

**By Chelsea Phua - Bee Staff Writer**

The women kicked off their high heels, took off their suit jackets, and began dancing to the popular disco song "We Are Family."

As they sang its chorus, the women threw punches, stepped sideways, did box steps and went around the room in a train.

Seleda Williams, an investigator in a research project to educate African American women about cardiovascular diseases, was showing the women creative exercises -- all mild to moderate -- that they can do and teach others to do.

"It's just loads and loads of fun," said Polly Turner, from the Links Inc., a nonprofit organization of accomplished African American women. Turner was one of about 30 Links representatives who attended a training session for the program on Friday in Sacramento.

Links is partnering with the University of California, Davis, on the 18-month nationwide project, which aims to recruit about 500 African American women between the ages of 40 and 60, or older.

"The program is to educate African American women about cardiovascular risk factors," said Kimberly Jeffries Leonard, one of the project's two principal investigators. "To change behavior and maintain a healthy lifestyle."

The program's principal investigator, Amparo Villablanca, said it's unique because the study is carried out at a community level, instead of in a clinic or laboratory.

The study is funded by a federal grant and contributions from UC Davis, Leonard said.

Ten Links chapters from New York to Tennessee to Fresno and Sacramento are participating in the project.

Delores Covington, president of the Sacramento chapter, said the program aims to recruit women from both inner-city and rural areas to cover a broad segment of the target population.

Turner, who is an associate professor of health care administration at Texas Southern University in Houston, said few studies have been designed for African American women.

"If we implement the program as structured, we should see significant changes in the lifestyles of African American women and their families," Turner said. She is looking forward to bringing the program back to her community, Turner said.

Heart disease is the No. 1 killer of women, and more women die from it than men, said Villablanca, who heads the Women's Cardiovascular Medicine Program at UC Davis and sought the grant to fund the project.

"African American women have higher prevalence and intensity of some of the major risk factors, like high blood pressure and being overweight," Villablanca said.

In 2002, the heart disease death rate per 100,000 was 263 for African American women, compared with 192 for white women and 197 for all women. Villablanca cites studies that show 55 percent of African American women do not exercise, compared with 38 percent of white women. Also, 77 percent of African American women are overweight or obese, compared with 21 percent of white women.